

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR AND CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS

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THE WAGES WHICH PREVAIL

1. Introduction

It is one of the most astonishing and acute symptoms of farm labor disorganization that no one -- including the agencies which should know, and which receive public funds to find out -- knows how much money California's agricultural workers earn. Mr. Edward F. Hayes, testifying before a Congressional subcommittee at a time when he was still Chief of California's Farm Placement Service, stated, "Piece work pays very well in California ... \$20 a day is quite common." What is the meaning of "quite common?" Was Mr. Hayes in a position to prove \$20-per-day earnings were more common than \$5-per-day earnings? One thinks not. "Common" is obviously a weasel word, which has no statistical meaning whatever.

A spokesman for California peach growers publicly stated on August 16, 1959, that "skilled domestic peach pickers can make up to \$40 a day." What does this mean, statistically? Precisely nothing.

At times, growers seem to be engaged in a game, the object of which is to see who can make the highest agricultural wage claim. Mr. Henry Everett, a peach grower of Yuba City, leads the contest to date. Testifying before a Congressional committee on November 8, 1957, Mr. Everett said,

I do not feel there is a need for a minimum wage for agriculture.... Any industrious man has the opportunity to earn far more than this proposed minimum wage of \$1 per hour, including any overtime benefits. Last year peach pickers averaged from \$10 to \$25 per day... I would like to add there are men who earn as high as \$50 or \$60 a day...

This Congressional hearing was conducted by Joe Holt from Van Nuys, and James Roosevelt from Los Angeles. Neither being from a peach growing district, neither thought to question Mr. Everett upon his testimony. It might have been pertinent to note, for example, that the most common rate in the "Peach Bowl" that year was 12¢ per box. Under these circumstances, a man would have to pick 480 boxes to earn \$60. Mr. Everett might have been asked to demonstrate that any man anywhere has ever picked 480 boxes of peaches in a day.

But year after year such allegations pass virtually unchallenged. Labor and liberal groups sometimes attempt to offset growers' wage claims by producing cases in which competent and diligent agricultural workers average 15¢ an hour, or less, under the piece rate system. Extremely low figures are hardly more useful than extremely high figures. Neither tells us what we most need to know: what are the earnings of the average farm worker? And are these earnings sufficient for a tolerable level of living?

Each year the U. S. Department of Agriculture issues data concerning the hourly wages of farm workers in each State. The most recent figure for California was \$1.17. The method by which the Department of Agriculture arrives at its wage data is veiled in mystery. Nonetheless, the \$1.17 figure is solemnly cited at every public hearing on farm labor, and invariably treated with all the respect usually reserved for objective fact. Legitimate farm workers can only regard the spectacle with grim and silent amusement. They know the figure of \$1.17 is at least \$.25 too high, but they do not have the resources to conduct their own surveys of wages. And the State agencies which should be fulfilling this function are surveying something totally different.

2. The "Prevailing Wage"

The Farm Placement Service of the State of California, among its other duties, is responsible for the periodic assessment of wages in each of the State's commercial crop activities. The concept of a "prevailing wage" raises many interesting questions. For example, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee has asked the Farm Placement Service to identify the number and types of persons with whom it consults in ascertaining the "prevailing wage." The AWOC has received no reply. However, Edward F. Hayes answered the question in the following way in a 1957 Congressional hearing.

Mr. ROOSEVELT. Do you make a finding on prevailing wages?

Mr. HAYES. Yes

Mr. ROOSEVELT. For whom?

Mr. HAYES. For the Secretary of Labor...

Mr. ROOSEVELT. How broad a survey is that?

Mr. HAYES. It depends. If it is a small commodity, small crop, we might make a 100 percent survey of all employers. If it is a large crop, such as cotton, ... it, of course, would be much smaller but it would be conclusive. Generally, it would run from 5 to 8 percent of all employers....

The question might be raised as to why the Farm Placement Service neglects to consult with workers, as it is required by law to do. The question might also be raised as to how a wage can "prevail" four to six weeks before a crop activity has begun -- which is the time most "prevailing wages" are determined. The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee has asked all these questions of the agencies involved, and has in no case received a reply.

For the purposes of the present discussion, however, another quite different question is even more important: why are all the State's wage surveys couched in terms devoid of human meaning? Even assuming the Farm Placement Service's methodology were unassailable, what does a piece rate tell us? What does a "prevailing wage" of 14¢ a box for peaches, or 12¢ a box for tomatoes, tell us? It tells us that a person will receive 14¢ if he fills a box with 40 pounds of marketable peaches, and 12¢ if he fills a box with 50 pounds of marketable tomatoes. That is all. It tells us nothing about the number of boxes a person can pick in an hour, a day, or a week. It tells us nothing about the earnings a person will have to show for the time he spends in the field or the orchard. It tells us nothing whatever about the variables which influence productivity and hence earnings: size of fruit; ripeness of fruit, quantity of fruit available; size of trees; availability and condition of ladders, boxes, buckets and other equipment; condition of the floor of the orchard; and so forth.

Much the same sorts of things may be said about the State's determinations of "prevailing" hourly wages. How many hours does an individual work in a day? How many days does he work in a week? How many weeks does he work in a year? These are things the State of California does not know -- but needs to know. California should know a great deal about the real earnings of its largest industrial labor force. For many reasons, it should know how much its agricultural workers are able to spend for their food, their clothing, their shelter, and their medical care. At the present time, this State has no sound information -- it does not even have an informed guess -- about these fundamental human concerns.

Among their many shortcomings, this is the most serious shortcoming of the Farm Placement Service's wage surveys: they do not survey wages, in any meaningful sense, at all. They only survey rates.

Persons who need farm wage information as a basis for the most vital sorts of decisions are forced to operate in a void. They must use hunches, prejudices, impressions. One man's guesses are as good as another man's guesses, and no two men's guesses are quite the same. The forces which are convinced that farm wages are too low, and the forces which are convinced they are not, have traditionally been akin to ignorant -- or, shall we say, underinformed -- armies which clash by night. They have been shying lumps of coal at one another in the darkness.

3. AWOC Peach Wage Survey

The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee has little appetite for this traditional battle waged in **blackness**. The AWOC has little appetite for allegations couched in weasel terms -- allegations which can neither be proved nor disproved -- allegations which convince no one. We recognize that there are persons who prefer to fight in the dark. We are well aware that many individuals and organizations do not wish the facts known about agricultural wages. This, perhaps, is the reason no agency gathers meaningful information about farm wages in California. We note, for example, that no agency of government has shed a scintilla of light upon the peach controversy. No agency has said a meaningful word about the **crux** of the entire controversy: how much do peach pickers earn?

The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee hereby serves notice that it no longer proposes to be a target for cinders flung in the dark. The AWOC proposes to force a shift in the discussion, from darkness to broad daylight, and a shift in weapons from verbal slag to verities. If anyone chooses to continue operating in a void, he will operate alone. The AWOC will not be there.

This Committee has taken it upon itself to conduct what is perhaps the first meaningful wage survey ever made in the California peach harvest. Two hundred and fifteen peach pickers were interviewed, by means of a standard form which is attached as an appendix to this paper. Interviews were conducted in Stanislaus, Contra Costa, San Joaquin, Sutter, and Yuba Counties -- in private homes, on the streets, in labor camps, in the orchards. Informants were taken just as they came; they were not selected in any way. All interviews were conducted between August 13 and August 16, 1959: at the height of what was called "the most serious labor shortage in the history of the California peach industry."

Two hundred and seven (207) of the informants had had one or more years of prior experience picking peaches; three (3) were picking peaches for the first time this year; information was not available for the remaining five (5). The average length of experience in our sample was 9.05 years.

88.0% of our informants were male; 12.0% were female. The average age of our sample was 41.9 years.

Several points should be made very clear in connection with this study. (a) The survey technique could hardly be as rigorous as that of the U. S. Bureau of the Census, or the Gallup organization. But, (b) the results discussed here must stand as definitive in their field unless and until the Farm Placement Service or some other agency supplants them with results based on a demonstrably superior research design. (c) The results of this peach wage survey are important in and of themselves, and even more important

in that they demonstrate the sorts of information which can feasibly be gathered by the interview technique, and which are badly needed in every one of California's crop activities. The AWOC regards the present study as a pilot survey, and earnestly hopes that some other organization or agency, with greater resources for the task, will henceforth undertake comparable surveys on a routine basis.

4. Hours and rates

The peach pickers in our sample were asked, "In your most recent day of picking, how many hours did you work, exclusive of lunch or other breaks?" The average was 7.98 hours.

Our informants were asked, "In your most recent day of picking, what was the rate which was paid?" Nine persons had been employed at an hourly rate -- eight at \$1.00, one at \$1.25. All the remainder had worked at piece rates. The distribution was as follows:

10¢:	6
11¢:	0
12¢:	36
13¢:	18
14¢:	56
15¢:	35
16¢:	7
17¢:	9
18¢:	14
20¢:	4
25¢:	1

The median was 14.6¢.

5. Boxes picked

We asked the peach pickers whom we interviewed, "In your most recent day of picking, how many boxes did you pick?" The average was 53.1 boxes. We had no way of checking on the accuracy of the replies which we received, but internal and external evidence suggests that our average corresponds quite closely to a true average. Underreporting, if any, was probably balanced by overreporting, as in the case of the 49-year-old man who reported that he had picked 294 boxes in 7 hours. Our average of 53.1 boxes takes on added plausibility when compared with the State Department of Agriculture's estimate that the average productivity of a peach picker in California is 45 boxes per day. (We shall return to this point in a later section.)

6. Daily earnings

The average earnings of our informants, in their most recent day of peach picking, were \$7.54. It should be noted that these were gross earnings, before deductions for transportation, Social Security, lunches, and so forth. We shall leave it to the economists to comment upon the adequacy of such earnings to sustain a minimal standard of living.

7. Hourly Earnings

By dividing gross daily earnings by hours worked, we were able to arrive at the average hourly earnings of our sample. The figure was $94\frac{1}{2}$ ¢ per hour. Here, then, is the real meaning of the "prevailing wage" in the California peach harvest: the piece rate translates into \$.94 $\frac{1}{2}$ an hour; \$7.54 a day; \$37.70 a week. One could go on to extrapolate these figures to \$226.20 a month, but the danger in such a procedure is obvious: few, if any, peach pickers have a steady month's work at any time.

8. "The laborer is worthy of his hire"

a. Nature of the work.

At the outset, it should be understood that peach picking is one of the most highly skilled tasks in all agriculture. Ladder work, per se, is highly skilled -- the proper placement of a ladder is in itself an art which takes months to master. In addition, a peach picker must normally grade his fruit as he picks. Except in the final "stripping" operation, he picks either by color or by size. Full mastery of picking either by color or by size takes years to acquire.

Nothing is more galling to a fruit worker than to be called an "unskilled laborer." There are no jobs in industry or in construction which require a longer apprenticeship than the picking of peaches, apricots, pears, and other soft fruits.

It should be borne in mind throughout the following discussion of a "reasonable wage" that hod-carrying and other forms of unskilled labor are not a proper standard against which to assess the earnings of a journeyman peach picker. A more proper standard would be the earnings of skilled workers in industry.

b. Competence of the sample.

As noted earlier, our sample consisted almost entirely of experienced peach pickers -- professionals, who were trying to make their livelihood at this type of work. We interviewed none of the amateurs -- high school boys and girls, servicemen, Mexican Nationals -- whose productivity is naturally low. (In a later Research Paper, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee proposes to examine in detail the subject of the relative productivity of serious farm workers as distinguished from the various types of "supplemental" labor utilized by California growers.)

We asked our informants, "In an average orchard, in an average year, how many boxes of peaches are you able to pick in an average day?" The mean was 84.1 boxes. Those who know the peach business will recognize that this is a reasonable average for a diligent professional picker. As we move on to the following questions, the figure of 84.1 boxes should be kept in mind. It represents one and three fourths tons of fruit, even if each box holds a bare 40 pounds (under existing farm labor practices, most boxes hold more). One and three fourths tons of peaches, in an average year, brings a cannery price of well over \$100.

This is the important point: the journeyman peach picker is aware, in at least a general way, of the value of his labor. He is aware that he performs a task an amateur cannot perform adequately. He is aware that in a day of work, he produces a tremendous quantity of a tremendously important commodity. (Have you ever seen 85 field boxes of fruit, stacked together? They almost fill a good-sized room.) This, to repeat, is an all-important point: the fruit worker may be low-rated by others, but in an inchoate way, at least, he is aware of his worth.

c. Wages desired.

Our informants were asked, "In order to keep you on a peach picking job, what (wages) would you need to make in an average 8-hour day?" The mean was \$12.91 a day, or \$1.61 an hour.

The average estimate of \$1.61 an hour as a reasonable wage seems modest enough in view of what we have already said about the nature of this work. It seems modest, too, in view of the extreme seasonality of fruit picking. A professional fruit picker must earn enough during the fleeting harvest season to see him and his family through much of the remainder of the year. Earnings from pruning, thinning, and other operations, are generally only supplementary to the "nest egg" the fruit worker tries to set ^{aside} during the harvest.

In comparing responses to this question with responses to other questions on our schedule, we found the following: in the most recent day of picking, 184 informants had made less than their concept of a "reasonable wage"; 5 had made the equivalent of their concept; 6 had made more than their concept. In other words, 94.4% of our sample had earned less than the valuation they placed on their own labor.

d. "Prevailing wages" versus "reasonable wages": the hiatus.

It will be recalled that informants in our sample reported that they had picked an average of 53.1 boxes of peaches during their most recent day of work. It will also be recalled that our informants reported that in an average year, in an average orchard, they were able to pick 84.1 boxes. Their productivity, in other words, was 36.9% below normal. This can be no mere coincidence. It can certainly not be attributed to "soldiering," since, as we have said before, these were professional fruit

workers who were trying to make the largest possible "stake" during a brief harvest season. It is evident that this is a bad year for peach pickers -- a protean truth which has been generally overlooked amid the hue and cry over the difficulties of peach growers. In many areas, peaches are small, and pickers have had to throw away tons of "pickles" for which they did not get paid. In all areas, unusually hot weather has caused unusually rapid ripening, and pickers have had to throw away tons of overripe peaches for which they were not paid.

One would think that when the productivity of skilled workers is curtailed for reasons beyond their control, that the rate of their recompense would be adjusted in such a way they were still able to earn a livelihood. Nothing of this sort has been done in the 1959 California peach harvest -- nothing of this sort has ever been done in California agriculture. We cannot dwell in detail upon the reasons, but the principal reason may be summarized briefly: California growers have never had to revise their wage offers, in accordance with crop conditions, because they have always had available one or another form of labor which was required to work at the "prevailing rate." At the present time, growers are guaranteed such a labor force by the United States government, through the bracero program.

The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee fails to see the justice of this system. By a similar token, it fails to see the justice reflected in productivity data used by the State Departments of Agriculture and Employment. These agencies calculate that the average output per man-day in the peach harvest is .9 tons, or 45 field boxes of 40 pounds each. At this rate, when the Farm Placement Service certifies a "prevailing wage" of 10¢ per box, it is in effect certifying a wage of \$4.50 per day, or 56¢ per hour. Following are other examples of certifications which follow, in effect, from the average productivity figures which the Farm Placement Service itself employs.

If the piece rate is: The daily rate is: And the hourly rate is:

11¢	\$4.95	\$.62
12¢	5.40	.67 $\frac{1}{2}$
13¢	5.85	.73
14¢	6.30	.79
15¢	6.75	.84 $\frac{1}{2}$
16¢	7.20	.90
17¢	7.65	.95 $\frac{1}{2}$
18¢	8.10	1.01

This point is of more than academic interest. The Farm Placement Service requires that growers who employ Mexican Nationals shall adjust their piece rates upward if the Nationals are not able to earn the equivalent of the most common hourly rate in the area. The most common hourly rate in peach-growing counties varies from \$1.00 to \$1.25. If the

regulation applied to Mexican Nationals were applied to American citizens, productivity of 45 boxes a day would translate into an average of 18¢ to 22¢ per box. Productivity such as that reported by our sample this year (53.1 boxes per day) would translate into rates of 15¢ to 19¢ per box.

To look at the matter another way, if our informants were to receive the wages they considered fair and equitable -- i.e., \$1.61 per hour -- they would have to receive $28\frac{1}{2}$ ¢ per box at the box per day rate which the Farm Placement Service considers ^{average}. They would have to receive about $24\frac{1}{2}$ ¢ per box at the 53 box per day rate which they report as their average this year.

As remarked earlier, our informants were receiving an average, not of $24\frac{1}{2}$ ¢, but $14\frac{1}{2}$ ¢ per box. The difference between $14\frac{1}{2}$ ¢ and $24\frac{1}{2}$ ¢ is a measure of the hiatus between the "prevailing wage" and a "reasonable wage."

e. "Prevailing wage" versus "reasonable wage": the consequences.

When men are consistently paid less than they know they are worth, they may do one of four things. (a) They may remain at their place of employment, enduring frustration, and sinking into bitterness or some type of psychological escape. (b) They may seek another employer within the same general labor market. (c) They may withdraw from that labor market entirely. (d) They may take direct action to gain what they consider a "reasonable wage."

Some farm workers have remained within their employment, enduring frustration and developing a variety of emotional problems as a consequence. Many other farm workers move laterally within the farm labor market, day in and day out, seeking in vain for the place where they are able to earn what they conceive to be their worth. Growers complain about the "instability" of their employees; this "instability" is, however, completely understandable, and, in fact, inevitable under the circumstances. Still other farm laborers have withdrawn from the farm labor market entirely. Only in part is this due to the blandishments of other labor markets. In a real sense, farm workers are less attracted by other industries than they are repelled by agriculture. Nothing could be better calculated to drive a man out of a given type of employment than to say to him, in effect, "You are worth only 60% of what you think you are." This strikes at the roots of men's pride, and is more grievous than any other wound which agriculture inflicts upon its workers.

This brings us to the fourth alternative open to a peach picker, or to any other type of agricultural worker who is paid less than he knows he is worth. He may take action to gain his just due. The actionists in the farm labor force have throughout the decades been harrassed, jailed, and in some cases assassinated. No one knows how many farm

laborers are left who are constitutionally able to pursue the final alternative, which is by far the most demanding of the four.

The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee is staking its efforts on the assumption there are many such farm laborers left, and that in many other cases those who have been demoralized through the years can be given confidence in themselves once again. The AWOOC rests, in the last analysis, upon a faith in the resilience and indominability of the human spirit.

Organized growers are staking their efforts on a contrary assumption and a contrary faith.

Nobody can say which side shall be proved correct. But it would seem that our pilot survey of wages and aspirations in the peach harvest demonstrates, among other things, that most peach pickers still retain their self-respect, and place a realistic valuation upon their skills. Our survey demonstrates, secondly, that the "prevailing wage" in the peach industry undervalues these workers by more than 40% -- a situation which cannot indefinitely endure. It will be resolved either destructively -- through psychopathologies, through milling, through flight. Or it will be resolved constructively -- through human beings banding themselves together in the pursuit of that which they know is rightfully theirs.

Henry P. Anderson,
Director of Research

AWOC Research Paper #4,
August 19, 1959,
HA:dh

PEACH PICKERS' CENSUS

TO ALL PEACH PICKERS: Please answer the following questions as completely as you can. These answers will help us in representing you.

Agricultural Workers Organizing Committ.

Name _____ Age _____ Sex _____

Address _____ Telephone _____

Other members of your family available for peach picking _____

How many years have you picked peaches? _____

In an average orchard about how many boxes of peaches can you pick in an average day? _____

In order to keep you on a peach picking job, what would you need to make in an average 8 hour day? _____

How many people do you know that would be available for peach picking if this wage were offered? (Number) _____

Have you picked peaches this season? Yes _____ No _____

If so please complete the following questions: _____

Where was the orchard where you most recently picked? _____

What was the growers name? _____

What was the contractor's name? _____

What was the foreman's name? _____

Type of orchard: Cling peaches _____ Freestone peaches _____

Large trees _____ Small trees _____

Type of fruit: 1st picking _____ 2nd picking _____ stripping _____
Plentiful _____ Average _____ Scarce _____
Large _____ Average _____ Small _____
Canning _____ Fresh Market _____

Type of picking: Ring size _____ Color picking _____ Stripping _____

Did you have to do your own grading? Yes _____ No. _____

Were you paid for culls? Yes _____ No. _____

How many boxes did you pick in your most recent day of picking? _____

Did anybody pick into your same box? Yes _____ No _____ If so, who _____

Rate per box _____ Hours worked _____ Lunch hr? _____

TOTAL AMOUNT EARNED _____ By _____

Interviewer _____

8/2/59